

# Beyond the battlefield: Caesar on massacres, executions, and mutilations

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Pitched battles and sieges are the main events in the ancient accounts of Roman military campaigns. This is because major engagements were what ancient audiences were most interested in and where Roman generals like Julius Caesar could, through their writings, most dramatically display their *virtus* (excellence). Battles and sieges, however, were not the only areas where the Roman army inflicted damage upon their enemies. They also employed horrendous violence beyond the battlefield, and Caesar's own descriptions of his campaigns are packed with these massacres, executions, and mutilations.

Caesar and his officers wrote several long reports, or 'commentaries', describing the wars he fought. The *Gallic War* describes his conquest of Gaul in the 50s B.C., and the *Civil War* his campaigns against the Roman senatorial party led by Pompey and his successors in the first half of the 40s. The main aim of these 'commentaries' is to present and publicize a positive image of Caesar, whether he is beating up barbarian Gauls or fighting against his fellow Romans. In all of them, Caesar is very manipulative, and this manipulation frequently involves showing him as fully committed to bringing the Gallic tribes to heel or providing melodramatic descriptions of the violence employed by Pompey's lieutenants in order to blacken their reputations.

## Massacres of the Innocents

During the Gallic War, the warriors of the various tribes suffered tremendous casualties, if only a fraction of Caesar's figures are to be believed. As the cartoonist Larry Gonnick puts it, 'Caesar conquered the Gauls with a mixture of deft manoeuvre, engineering, diplomacy, and awesome carnage.' The non-combatant population must have also suffered horrendous casualties and Caesar provides us with some glimpses of this indiscriminate violence. For instance, in 55 B.C. when Caesar attacked the German Usipi tribe, he mentions how 'the crowd of women and children which remained began to flee in all directions. Caesar sent the cavalry to hunt them down.' Whether they were men, women, children, or the elderly, they were all legitimate targets in ancient warfare. Another example comes from 52 B.C., when Caesar describes his troops' slaughter of the Gallic inhabitants of Avaricum, a slaughter he justifies by referring to the recent Gallic massacre of some Roman citizens at the town of Cenabum:

*The Roman soldiers were so severely provoked by the massacre at Cenabum and the effort they put into the siege that they spared neither the elderly, nor the women, nor even the little children.*

If we look beyond his justification, again we can see the intensive and indiscriminate impact of Roman warfare.

One of Caesar's officers, Aulus Hirtius, indicates his general's capacity for more calculated ruthlessness. This occurs when Caesar captured the rebellious Gallic town of Uxellodunum in 51 B.C. and Hirtius describes the severe punishment that Caesar

inflicted on the captured Gallic warriors:

*He decided upon making an example of the townspeople in punishing them, so as to deter the rest. He allowed them to live, therefore, but cut off the hands of all those who carried arms against him. This made the punishment for wrongdoers plain to see.*

Although Hirtius claims that Caesar was being merciful here, one wonders how many Gauls actually survived the punishment of hand amputation, particularly in the light of a 1996 Amnesty International report. This mentions that prisoners who had their hands amputated under Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq later died of infection through their wounds, and one can imagine that the medical treatment amongst the ancient Gauls would have been quite basic, without the modern knowledge of blood-vessels and any resultant blood poisoning.

## Friends, Romans, carcasses

It was during the period of the civil wars against Pompey and his supporters that Caesar started to actively promote a policy of *clementia* (clemency) towards his captured enemies, in that he was now sparing the lives of all those he had captured. Caesar employed this policy of clemency because it was an excellent means of drumming up Roman support for his cause. Furthermore, Caesar's emphasis on his clemency contrasts strongly with the way he dramatically portrays the violent actions of his rival Pompeian commanders.

A fine example comes from Caesar's narrative of early 48 B.C. when his ships were transporting troops across the Adriatic from Italy to Western Greece. Unfortunately, some of the returning transport vessels were captured by the Pompeian admiral, Marcus Bibulus, who decided to burn not only the ships, but their crews as well. Caesar even describes the fate of one Caesarian vessel in this way: 'Bibulus exacted retribution from all, slave and free, down to mere boys, and put them to death to the last man.' If we look beyond the emotive language that Caesar is employing here, such as the detail of the boys, Bibulus was doing nothing out of the ordinary. The Pompeian admiral was acting in the same vein as Caesar had against the Gauls, employing indiscriminate violence against his opponents. Bibulus was simply practising the Roman art of total war, regardless of whether they were warriors, women, old men, or Lucius the cabin boy; they were all legitimate military targets.

## Bring me the head of Dumnorix!

The Caesarian commentaries highlight another significant aspect of ancient warfare, the execution of opposition leaders. During the Gallic War, treachery is frequently cited to justify the execution of Gallic chieftains. For instance, in 54 B.C., whilst Caesar was preparing for his second expedition to Britain, he

became concerned about the loyalty of one chieftain, Dumnorix. Caesar says about Dumnorix and the other wavering Gallic allies: 'Caesar was afraid to kill them in sight of Gaul, but planned instead to take them all to Britain and there put them to death.' By executing these chieftains away from their homeland, Caesar hoped their deaths would not cause adverse publicity that might weaken his position in Gaul. Prior to sailing, however, Dumnorix fled from the Roman camp and, as a consequence, Caesar had to dispatch his horsemen, ordering them to kill him, and after surrounding the chieftain they did just that.

Such executions of Gallic leaders demonstrate how Caesar was not only acting as a soldier, but as a politician too. He employed a policy of 'divide and conquer' for his conquest of Gaul; a policy that included alliances and treaties with a number of Gallic tribes. Furthermore, his forces and operations depended on the resources of the Gallic tribes, most notably food, auxiliary troops, and transportation, such as vessels for his British expeditions. In the light of such violence and exactions it is not surprising that some tribes' loyalty would waver on occasion. Therefore the calculated execution of key troublemakers was going to reduce the chance of a major revolt, a revolt that might undermine his numerous achievements in Gaul.

### Brothers in arms

The executions of individual leaders are also described in the *Civil War*, but here they are exploited in order to blacken the image of certain Pompeian leaders. One particular target was Quintus Caecilius Scipio. For example, in 46 B.C. Scipio captured a small group of Caesarian soldiers who had been sailing to North Africa. The anonymous author of the *African War*, one of the *Civil War* commentaries, details their fate after they were brought before Scipio. To start with, Scipio appealed to them to change sides. The Caesarian centurion who was the leader of the prisoners delivered a very eloquent refusal to Scipio's request, and this refusal supposedly so inflamed the Pompeian leader that he had him immediately put to death. Scipio then had the veterans amongst the prisoners separated from the fresh recruits and then said:

*'Take them away stained as they are by a dreadful crime and fattened on the blood of Romans.' So they were taken outside the rampart and tortured to death.*

If we look beyond this melodramatic description, within the unwritten rules of ancient warfare, Scipio has done nothing wrong, because anyone captured by an enemy commander was subject to his will, whether this was enslavement, freedom, or death. By providing the dramatic details of Scipio's cruelty and the image of the brave and loyal centurion, the writer was simply trying to paint the Pompeian commander in an extremely bad light.

The Caesarian commentaries demonstrate that Roman commanders employed violence in a variety of contexts beyond the battlefield. We must remember that the primary aim of a Roman commander during a campaign was the destruction of the enemy, and he could achieve this through massacres or individual executions as well as by pitched battles and sieges. What Caesar and other Roman commanders indicate within these commentaries, through the mist of literary spin, is that a variety of violence was frequently employed. Perhaps it is not surprising that Caesar felt it would be acceptable to be shown massacring barbarians in Gaul, while only the enemy Pompeians are shown behaving so badly in the Civil War. Roman warfare, whether it was on the battlefield, dealing with prisoners, or targeting enemy leaders, was undoubtedly a ruthless phenomenon.

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